

Reflection for the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity (30.08.20)

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Let's be honest: the invitation to take up our cross doesn't sound particularly great. As marketing strategies go, this one is seriously lacking in appeal. In terms of lifetime ambitions, it offers little in the way of success. What's more, we know where this sort of approach took Jesus...and it definitely wasn't the kind of vindication his friends were hoping for, after ditching everything for him.

Poor old Peter. We heard only last week that Jesus praised him for a moment of divine revelation - a moment of boldness and courage, in which he finally understood who Jesus was and wasn't afraid to say it. Peter thought that his confession meant that Jesus was the conquering Messiah who would lead his army to drive out the Romans and take back the land. Not so, says Jesus, in no uncertain terms: but Peter is having none of it. Suddenly, we're back in the desert of temptation, with Jesus rebuking the devil for trying to divert him from his mission.

The passage from Jeremiah doesn't make for comfortable reading, either. Essentially, Jeremiah is questioning the basis of his whole vocation, and doubting God's faithfulness. 'You are to me,' he says to God, 'like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.' The message that Jeremiah was proclaiming to the people had resulted in pain, loneliness, and threats against him. But, when God speaks to him, Jeremiah begins to realise that his words need to be 'precious' - not the kind of words that would entertain or grab attention, but words that call people *out* and into new life. God knows that Jeremiah is still more concerned about his own status and reputation than the fate of his neighbours.

At the point of suffering - whether real or imagined - both Peter and Jeremiah begin to doubt God's purposes. Both would have preferred a different kind of path altogether. Maybe we can think of moments like these in our own spiritual lives. Maybe we can think of times when we've looked to make the message of Christianity more attractive, more appealing, lest it should frighten people off.

All the evidence suggests that the world needs different voices and a different kind of life. Wherever we look, words are cheap and sacrificial leadership is in short supply. From Belarus to Brazil, from the USA to Lebanon, our politics - the world over - is one of the avoidance of responsibility, broken promises, the manipulation of the truth, corruption. And, a little closer to home, we see the shadow of complicity. Our lives don't always measure up to our words. We know the truth, in order to speak it, but we find it much more difficult to live it. As protests continue again in the US, this time in Wisconsin, how might we confront our own participation in unjust structures so that our words have real weight?

The dynamic, costly action of God in reconciliation, restoration and resurrection to new life is the foundation of our Christian life and of our ministry. It's what we sing about, it's the story we tell, it's what we celebrate in the Eucharist. Or at least it is when we're in church. But perhaps this time of exile in the wilderness may be for

us a time of radical refashioning - a time in which we are given the chance to get our collective house in order and to consider the cross-shaped vocation of each of our lives. As we have continued to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land, maybe we've also had a chance to lift our heads above the parapet and to think again about the kind of people the world needs us to be. And it's never too late for this sort of work.

Of course, the sacrifices and choices we make on account of our faith in Jesus will be unique to each one of us. 'This is just a cross I have to bear,' we sometimes say, or hear others saying, in passing. But there's invariably a weightiness lying behind these words. Some of these crosses will have come about through circumstance - through situations that are not of our choosing, but that we endure. Other crosses will have come about through choice - through deliberate self-sacrifice, intentional courage. Either way, they will often be hidden or unseen crosses that we are bearing, because they don't usually lead to the sort of status, honour or reward that the world recognises. And our own, quiet suffering can align us with the quiet suffering of others.

I found myself confronted with two rather different stories about motherhood this week. The first was the story of Mercy Baguma, an asylum seeker from Uganda who was living in extreme poverty in Glasgow, found dead next to her malnourished baby. Reports indicate that she lost her job after her limited leave to remain immigration status expired, and she'd been relying on food from friends and charitable organisations. Mercy was one of many thousands of people driven to destitution by a complex tangle of things, including mental health issues, this global pandemic and an inhumane approach to those who have no recourse to public funds in the UK.

The second story was rather different: the reflection, via a podcast, of a gay mother on her experience of being 'The Other Mother', the one whose body is unchanged by pregnancy and birth and whose existence is still a baffling footnote to the whole experience of parenthood. The one who is subject to the unthinking assumptions and prejudices of others. Arriving at work for a meeting after her twin daughters were born, Claire's colleague announced, 'Here she comes, the woman who can't even be bothered to give birth to her own children!' Not realising how long she had spent trying and failing to get pregnant and stay pregnant - her reflections on the bruising experience of IVF are poignant to hear.

I won't presume to make tenuous links between these stories, or - indeed - bend them to fit the pattern of my own reflection. But both stories spoke to me about bearing crosses. Both stories reminded me that the path to life is fraught with hard choices - some of our own choosing, and some that have been thrust upon us. Both stories spoke to me of the suffering that we don't always see - or are blinded to, through complacency - and the importance of putting our money where our mouths are.

Taking up our cross may not be the show-stopping, headline-grabbing soundbite we'd like it to be. Living into the calling of a cross-shaped life requires us to reorder our priorities so that our lives match the message. Living into the calling of a cross-shaped life takes courage, it takes love, and it takes a big dose of faith against the odds. There is a real risk of suffering ourselves if we follow Jesus, and of feeling the suffering of others more keenly. But there is also the hope of finding the only truly rewarding life.

Amen.